THE LOST REGIMENT.

I.

THE MAJOR'S EXECUTION.

During the war of secession I served for three years in the confederate army. I belonged to what was known as the Forlorn regiment.

I was only 17 when I joined the regiment, but that was not an unusual thing in the southern armies, and in my case I had the less difficulty of being admitted to the ranks because my father, Captain Atkins, commanded the company which I joined. He was shot through the head three days after I reached camp, so I was not long without feeling to the full the horrors of war.

The Forlorn regiment received its name because it was always employed whenever a forlorn hope was needed, and because the men were so gloomy and reserved, and never joked and laughed and enjoyed themselves like the soldiers of the other regiments. After the loss of my father I soon fell in with their ways. There was no merry-making in our regiment. After a victory there would be hand-shakings and solemn congratulations, but no laughing or singing. The truth was that after we once acquired our reputation no recruit who had a liking for jollity would join us. If any such did come among us he always changed to some other regiment as quickly as he could. The recruits who stayed were sober, earnest, gloomy men like the rest of us, who had heard that the regiment had never yet given back when the colonel bade them stand their ground, and who wished to share the glory of our reputation. We were always on the march or fighting, and that was just what we liked.

How it was that we kept up our unbroken series of victories I do not know. It was not because we were given easy tasks, for we often attempted what seemed the impossible. It was partly because we fought with the discipline of automatons and the fury of so many devils. The confederate armies suffered defeats from time to time; we never happened to be present. But we were at Bull Run, and at Groveton, and at Fredericksburg, and at scores of other battles. We had the good fortune that proverbially attends the desperate. To most soldiers, however brave, the fear of death is something that holds them back from doing what they might do. To us death was a matter of indifference. One of the few times I can remember a smile traveling over the grim faces of our regiment was at roll call on the morning after the second Bull Run, when we had lost a third of our men. The ranks filled gradually after that battle, but they were never so full as before. Our regiment was respected, but it was never popular.

On the fifth day of September, 1863, the regiment was under arms early, as usual, and ready to march. We were encamped at some distance from the rest of our brigade, at the foot of a little hill, somewhere in the western part of Virginia; I never knew the name of the place. A quarter of a mile or so from the hill were some straggling woods with open country beyond; but we were not afraid of a surprise, for the old colonel was very careful about posting vedettes.

Instead of forming us in marching column as usual, the colonel drew us all up company front, as he did at parades. Then we knew there was to be an execution, for the colonel never delayed the march for anything else.

I had seen several executions since I joined the regiment; they were not uncommon. For any serious breach of discipline the offender was shot. John Callender was shot for falling asleep at his post, though he had not slept for three nights, and though his brother Amos had gone down on his knees to the colonel and begged for mercy. Nothing ever moved the colonel.

I knew that there had been a court-marshal the night before, but who was the offender and what was his fate I had not learned. Imagine my astonishment when I saw the major of the regiment led out in front of us with his hands tied behind his back.

Major Freeland and Colonel Hendricks never agreed well, except in action. There they were both cool, resolute and utterly fearless, and both seemed able to foresee what the other desired. But other times they were sure to be at loggerheads. Major Freeland was the darling of his regiment. He disapproved of the harshness of the colonel's discipline. The colonel considered the major as a very lax officer, though he was really as strict as any one could desire. In fact, the colonel had been heard to say that if he were killed his only reason for regretting it would be that Major Freeland would succeed him in command. Such smoldering passions are easily fanned to a flame.

I do not know what the major had done. He was condemned as having "held communication with the enemy." I believed him as loyal as the colonel himself; and the whole regiment, except the colonel, believed him innocent. But Colonel Hendricks had influenced the other officers at the court-martial, and now Major Freeland was to be shot.

Our regiment was so different from the others and kept so much apart from the rest of the army that we had a good many customs peculiar to ourselves. All these customs were carried out with the most rigorous formality. The ceremony that attended an execution was especially remarkable. Our executions were all done in the most public manner possible, so that mutineers and deserters might know what to expect. The regiment was drawn up in line, and then the colonel read aloud the names of the six best marksmen in the regiment. These six men stepped forward and took their position at some thirty yards' distance from the criminal. The prisoner was stationed near a tree. On his breast was pinned a piece of white paper, cut in the shape and size of a heart, and a similar paper was attached to the tree. The major gave the orders: "Ready! Aim! Fire!" The six men fired at the heart on the tree, and I never knew one of them to miss it. Then the major gave the orders again, and this time they aimed at the heart pinned on the prisoner.

The custom had arisen from an incident in the first year of the war. A deserter, sentenced to be shot, had been wounded but not killed, and had suffered terribly before he died. After this unfortunate accident, Major Freeland had devised the plan of the duplicated heart pinned to the tree so as to make sure that not a hand was trembling and not an eye was untrue. Since then, every criminal has been killed at the first volley.

And now it seemed that the major was to enjoy the small benefit coming from the plan devised by his own humanity. How I remember that scene! The old colonel standing still as a statue with one hand on his horse's mane; the major erect and defiant as we had seen him a hundred times in battle, only now his hands were tied behind his back; the grim line of six lanky veterans waiting for the word of command. Amos Callender was one of them. He had taken part in every execution since the regiment was formed, except when his own brother was shot; for he was the best marksman in the regiment. Every one of the six would have given his life for the major; and now they were to send six bullets through his heart.

The day was perfect. The sun was rising high in the east. In the west great white clouds were sailing lazily before the wind, as they do in midsummer. The birds were singing everywhere. It was a day when life seemed very sweet; a day for living, not dying.

The major had asked and obtained the privilege of giving the orders to aim and fire himself. He was a fine man to look at, Major Freeman. Six feet three in his stocking feet, and a noble head on a noble pair of shoulders. He had lightened our backs of many burdens that the colonel had laid on them; and now, in spite of the colonel's frown and our usually perfect discipline, there was muttering in the ranks.

The paper heart was pinned to the